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RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK PRIORITY 0001
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000139

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TAGS: [PHUM PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [CASC](#) [TH](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: CHINA-FOCUSED CHRISTIAN GROUP SAYS GOING GETTING TOUGHER IN
WESTERN CHINA

REF: CHIANG MAI 116

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CLASSIFIED BY: Michael K. Morrow, Consul General, Consulate
General Chiang Mai, Dept. of State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary

1. (C) It is getting tougher to operate in western China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, according to the head of the "Friends of China" (FOC) Christian group's Chiang Mai office. Although FOC - which has been placing teachers and developmental workers in China for 20 years - has never had any associates expelled from the country, our contact said officials in the largely Muslim Xinjiang region recently shut down the FOC office in Urumqi and refused to renew the visa of the office head, who had been in country for 10 years (reftel). Local officials have, however, allowed other FOC associates in the area to remain. End Summary.

FOC: 20-Year Track Record in China

2. (C) CG met August 23 with Norwegian Gunnar Boe (protect), head of the Chiang Mai office of the "Friends of China" (FOC). He described FOC as a Christian - but not missionary - group that has been placing teachers and developmental workers in China for 20 years. The FOC's China headquarters is in Chengdu, and its external headquarters moved from Hong Kong to Chiang Mai in 1997. According to Boe, FOC originally placed most of its associates in eastern China, but in recent years has shifted its focus to western and central China as those areas became more accessible. "There's greater need there" for FOC's services as well, he said.

Xinjiang Officials Get Tough

3. (C) Boe reported that in recent months FOC has found it more difficult to operate in the largely Muslim Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in western China. He claimed that China and several immediate western neighbors - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan - were colluding via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to squeeze out Western NGOs that were operating in their respective Muslim areas. In FOC's case, local officials in Xinjiang had recently closed down the FOC office in Urumqi -

which had been properly registered with authorities. They were reportedly unhappy with FOC activities in the city of Turpan, and maneuvered to terminate the lease of the Urumqi office. They also declined to renew the visa of the Swedish couple who headed the Urumqi office. The couple had previously received one-year visas for ten consecutive years. FOC appealed the closure and the visa issue to central administrative authorities in Beijing, but received neither assistance nor an explanation.

¶4. (C) Boe pointed out that other FOC associates in Xinjiang have been permitted to remain, but characterized the non-renewal of the Swedes' visas as "a signal." He offered no evidence of any similar moves in the neighboring states to Xinjiang's west.

FOC Operations

¶5. (C) FOC currently has about 160 associates placed in China, about half of whom are Americans, Boe said. Chiang Mai serves as a convenient staging point and administrative center for the associates, who receive a 10-day orientation there before proceeding into China. FOC associates obtain their Chinese visas from the Chinese Consulate General in Chiang Mai. Boe said the Consulate has never contacted his office or made any inquiry about FOC activities. He was not aware of any other Christian groups that were operating in China out of Chiang Mai.

¶6. (SBU) In case of health or other emergencies in China, Chiang Mai serves as the evacuation safehaven for FOC associates. A small number of associates evacuated here during the SARS outbreak. The Chiang Mai office was also prepared to receive associates following the 1999 accidental NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, but none were evacuated.

¶7. (SBU) Boe said his two-year assignment to Chiang Mai will end next summer, after which he and his family will return to Norway, where he is a telecoms engineer. His replacement has not yet been named, as the FOC staff positions are difficult to fill.

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Comment

¶8. (C) The FOC believes it is on relatively solid ground in China due to its long, incident-free track record there. Boe, however, expressed concern that operating in western China could continue to get tougher, and noted his awareness of speculation that Chinese authorities may seek to move against religious expression in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics.
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